

THE
CENTRE BRIDGE

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The Centre Bridge

Early in the last century, at what is now known as Stockton, in New Jersey, Joseph Howell owned land adjacent to the Delaware River and operated a ferry, the place being known as Howell's Ferry. On the opposite side of the river, in Pennsylvania, William Mitchell owned land with ferry rights and the place was known as Mitchell's Ferry.

In February, 1809, a number of residents in the vicinity of Mitchell's Ferry, conceived the idea that the erection of a bridge over the Delaware at that place would be a great public convenience. Petitions were presented to the Legislature of Pennsylvania, then in session. Petitions to incorporate a company for a similar purpose, at New Hope, were also presented at the same session. Nothing being done at this time, petitions from the two places, respectively, were presented in the ensuing autumn (1809) to the Legislature of New Jersey, and separate acts, authorizing the incorporation of companies, for the erection of a bridge at each place, were passed by that body and forwarded to Pennsylvania for concurrence.

Other Petitions Presented.

While the subject was under discussion in the Legislature of Pennsylvania, other petitions were presented by the advocates of the bridge at New Hope, praying the consolidation of the two applications into one law and the appointment of commissioners to determine to which site the preference should be given. An act was passed agreeing to this and forwarded to New Jersey for concurrence. At this time petitions praying for the erection of a bridge at Bull's Island, were pre-

sented in New Jersey, and the Legislature of that state condensed the three applications into one act, dated February 18th, 1811, appointing commissioners on the part of that state, to view the River Delaware between Black's Eddy and Well's Falls and to determine on the site which, in their opinion would "best promote the public good."

Centre Bridge Company Formed.

By an act of March 23rd, in the same year, the Legislature of Pennsylvania concurred and appointed commissioners for the same purpose. The commissioners: John Barklay, Amos Slaymaker and John Hulse, of Pennsylvania; Caleb Newbold, Jacob Hufty and Isaac Mickle, of New Jersey, met at the house of William Mitchell, on September 9th, 1811, and after viewing the rival sites and hearing the advocates, decided in favor of Mitchell's Ferry. These commissioners appointed William Mitchell, Watson Fell, John Wilson, Samuel Johnson, William Hart, Thomas McEwan and James Hart, in Pennsylvania; Morris Robeson, Henry Dusenbury, John Britton, Alexander Bonnell, Samuel McNair, George Rea and Peter Fisher, in New Jersey, as commissioners to receive subscriptions to stock. Books were opened by these gentlemen. Under acts of the respective Legislatures, the par value of the shares had been fixed at \$50.00, and it was required that forty or more persons must have subscribed for a total of four hundred shares. The commissioners made choice of "The Centre Bridge Company" as the name of incorporation, and later certified that the requisite number of shares had been subscribed by the required number of

persons. Letters patent of incorporation were accordingly issued in New Jersey, August 17th, and in Pennsylvania, September 1st, 1812.

The subscribers now being authorized to proceed, met at the house of William Mitchell on October 21st, 1812, and organized by electing William Mitchell, president; Watson Fell, Samuel Johnson, John Wilson, Alburdis King, Pierson Reading and George C. Maxwell, managers. Aaron Eastburn was elected treasurer and William Sitgreaves appointed secretary.

Howell Sold His Rights.

Land and ferry rights together with sand and stone were purchased of Joseph Howell, who received forty shares of stock in payment; and a similar purchase was made of William Mitchell, who received twenty shares. These purchases included a road four perches wide extending to the public road on the New Jersey side of the river and to the Lower York road on the Pennsylvania side.

On Washington's birthday, February 22nd, 1813, a contract was entered into with Captain Peleg Kingsley and Benjamin Lord, of New England, for the erection of the bridge. The work proceeded during the year of 1813, and a frame one story toll house was erected at the Pennsylvania end of the bridge. John Abel was appointed toll keeper and entered upon his duties January 1st, 1814. In 1816, a substantial stone toll house was built at the New Jersey end of the bridge.

Location Suggests Name.

The name Centre Bridge was evidently suggested by the fact that of the three sites advocated, the central one was chosen. Following the erection of the bridge the small settlements on each side of the river became known as Centre Bridge. The one on the Pennsylvania side still retains that name, but the one on the New Jersey side when a post office was established in 1851, became known as Stockton.

The bridge at New Hope, connecting that place with Coryell's (formerly Lambert's Ferry and now Lambertville) was built soon after the erec-

tion of the Centre Bridge, but the bridge at Bull's Island was not erected until many years later.

Contractors Penalized \$1200.

The original Centre Bridge was a wooden structure, supported upon stone piers whose foundations consisted of timber cribbing. It was probably an open structure and is stated in the minutes of the company as being 833 feet 8 inches in length. Apparently the work of the contractors was not done to the satisfaction of the managers and the contractors were penalized to an amount of over \$1200 for certain deficiencies. One of the piers failed to withstand the first spring floods and had to be rebuilt within a short time after the bridge was opened for traffic. The original superstructure lasted only 16 years, and in 1830 it was completely rebuilt under contract with Amos Campbell. The new super-structure was evidently covered with a shingle roof, and with considerable replacements served until 1923.

Canals Dug Later.

The Delaware Division canal, on the Pennsylvania side of the river and the feeder of the Delaware and Raritan canal, on the New Jersey side, were dug some years later than the erection of the bridge. The bridges crossing these canals were built and at first maintained by the canal companies but the bridge over the Delaware Division canal was taken over by the bridge company in 1851, and in 1872 an iron bridge was erected over this canal under contract with William Cowen, of Lambertville.

January 8th, 1841, in the greatest freshet in the Delaware up to that time known, two piers, three spans and the toll house, all on the New Jersey side of the river were washed away. George B. Fell, Secretary of the bridge company, was on the bridge when the spans fell and went down with the wreckage. By lying flat upon the floating timbers, he passed safely under the bridge at Lambertville, and after several futile attempts by persons along the river, he was finally rescued by a man named

Nicholson who rowed in a boat, picked Fell up and landed on the Pennsylvania side of the river below Washington's Crossing.

The extensive damage to the bridge caused by this flood was repaired under contract with Courtland Yardley. A small frame toll house was erected on the foundations of the one washed away and this served until 1858, when the stone toll house now standing was built. While the work of repairing the damage caused by the 1841 flood was in progress, two piers on the Pennsylvania side of the river were taken down and replaced by a single pier. This was done to give greater clearance for rafts passing down the river and was required by an act of the Pennsylvania Legislature.

The Freshet of 1862.

On June 6th, 1862, a notable freshet occurred in the Delaware, a contributing cause being the breaking of a number of dams on the Lehigh. Rafting was at this time an important industry and this freshet was remarkable for the large number of logs from broken up rafts, that passed down the river. Owing to its condition Old Centre Bridge suffered but slight damage from this freshet.

October 10th, 1903, a great freshet conceded to have surpassed that of 1841, occurred in the Delaware. This freshet did a great deal of damage to bridges and property along the river. Fortunately Old Centre Bridge was not seriously damaged and was the only bridge, left standing in serviceable condition, between Trenton and Easton.

Motor Truck Crashes Thru

Before daylight on the morning of May 11th, 1922, John Perry and Louis Di Sodi while attempting to cross the bridge with a heavily loaded motor truck, broke through the flooring of the second span from the New Jersey end. Perry escaped falling but Di Sodi, who was driving, fell with the truck into about seven feet of water thirty feet below. The truck had been headed for New Jersey, but in falling it completely re-

versed itself and then stood upright headed toward Pennsylvania. Di Sodi, who could not swim, managed to break his way through the roof of the truck cab and, perched on top yelled loudly for help. Perry succeeded in passing the hole in the floor by climbing along the lattice-work side of the bridge and sought assistance. Patrick H. Ledger and William P. Colligan, Jr. procured a boat and rescued Di Sodi from his perilous position. Di Sodi escaped with a few bruises and later in the day was able to go to his home in Philadelphia.

Fires Threatened Span

In 1853 the burning of the hotel barn, a tailor shop and a shoemaker shop near the Pennsylvania end threatened to destroy the bridge. But it was saved by heroic efforts of Albert Kutter and Leonard Brady, who were suitably rewarded by the bridge company.

On Thursday evening, July 19th, 1923, an old unused fish cabin located on the river bank near the New Jersey end broke out in flames and for a time threatened to fire the bridge. The Stockton Fire Company ran a line of hose from a plug and stopped the fire without damage to the old structure.

Lightning Proves Fatal

Sunday evening, July 22nd, 1923, during a heavy thunder storm accompanied by high wind and dashing rain, the bridge was struck by lightning and fire broke out on the up-river side, near the first pier from the Pennsylvania shore. The fire, fed by the old shingle roof and dry timbers and fanned by the high wind, spread rapidly. New Hope firemen prevented the fire from spreading to near-by property at the Pennsylvania end. Stockton firemen ran a line of hose out on the bridge and fought the flames from the inside, but their efforts were unsuccessful and they were driven back span by span. They had retreated to the first span on the New Jersey end, which the fire had not yet reached, when the span, weakened by falling spans farther

out, broke off and fell, carrying eight firemen and eight volunteer helpers down to the river bed thirty feet below. Volunteers rushed down the river bank to their aid. When a final checking up was made it was found that although several of the fire fighters were painfully injured, no lives had been lost.

Thus Old Centre Bridge, its curled shingle roof, latticed pine sides and weather-beaten enclosure, rendered picturesque by time until it became fit subject for author and artist, met its doom at the hands of the fire fiend. Its service of 109 years, with no recorded loss of human life, deserves a fitting eulogy.

"Old Centre Bridge!"

Old Centre Bridge! Old Centre Bridge over the Delaware! Designed by the fertile brains and wrought by the skilled hands of our forefathers, whose dole was the "widows mite" compared to the reward of labor in our generation!

Choicest of pine, stoutest of oak, from America's primeval forests, and rock from the hills that form the banks of the beautiful river which thou hast safely borne generations across, entered into the construction. Faithfully thou didst perform the service for which thou wast fashioned.

Thrice wast thou threatened by devastating floods that occur a generation apart. Thrice did the fire fiend tear at thy vitals, and in the third battle, though strong trained men came to thy aid, did accomplish thy destruction.

Majestic, spectacular, exciting in thy moments of death agony, thou didst furnish inspiration for the brush of famous artist and the pen of more humble author. Thanks be to God! In all thy more than century of service, never didst thou destroy a human life.

Shame on us if we, though of weaker but wiser generation, forget our effort and our substance from thy restoration.

Investment Unprofitable at Outset

In its early years Centre Bridge was not a profitable investment for

its stockholders. An initial dividend of \$1.00 per share was declared in 1816, and small dividends were paid at more or less regular intervals until 1829. The expense of rebuilding the superstructure in 1830 rendered it impossible to continue the payment of dividends. In fact at this time the company found itself in great financial distress, and the abandonment of the bridge with total loss to its stockholders was seriously considered. This was averted by the action of the President and Managers, who advanced funds from their own purses and assumed personal responsibility for money borrowed by the company.

Again in 1841, to repair the extensive damage caused by the great freshet of that year, the officers, emulating the example of their predecessors, advanced personal funds and became responsible for sums borrowed by the company. The rebuilding of the entire superstructure and repairing of damage caused by ice and floods consumed the receipts of the company for many years and it was not until 1862 that the officers were able to report that the company was free from debt. For some years following 1862 the earnings of the company were wisely used to establish an emergency funds and dividends were not resumed until 1874, when a dividend of fifty cents a share was declared. Thus for a period of forty-four years the stockholders received no return from their investment. In recent years the bridge became more profitable, and dividends were gradually increased until 1885 when they amounted to \$3.00 per share, which was equivalent to 6% on the par value of the shares. This rate was continued practically until the destruction of the bridge.

Served 60 Years as Treasurer

Although the officers of the bridge company were elected annually and there were frequent changes, there are several instances of long service. Outstanding are the services of Dr. O. H. Sproul and Cyrus Risler. Dr. Sproul was first appointed Secretary in 1872. He served as Secretary and

as Manager performing the duties of Secretary for almost 53 years. Cyrus Risler was elected Treasurer in 1859. He served in that capacity until 1919 when he declined further service on account of the infirmities of age. He established the remarkable record of 60 years continuous service in one office.

Following the destruction of the bridge, the property and rights of the company were sold to the Joint Commission of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, for the Elimination of Toll Bridges over the Delaware. The reserve funds of the company had greatly increased in value from wise investments and this together with the insurance and price of \$10,000 received from the sale of the property, enabled the company to return its stockholders a little more than the par value of the stock.

In the winter of 1925 the Legislature of Pennsylvania and New Jersey each appropriated the sum of \$100,000, and under the direction of the Joint Commission, the piers and abutments were strongly reinforced with concrete and a modern steel bridge of 25 tons capacity erected. Later the Legislatures of each state made a deficiency appropriation of \$40,000. The work was under the charge of Louis Focht, Superintendent and Engineer of the Joint Commission. It was started in 1925 and completed July 16th, 1927, when at 12 o'clock noon it was opened for traffic.

Under the acts of the Legislatures of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the original stock of the Centre Bridge Company was limited to 900 shares of a par value of \$50 each. Books were required to be kept open for three days, at Philadelphia, at some place in Bucks County, and in New Jersey. Three hundred shares were assigned to each place. A subscriber on the first day was limited to five shares; on the second day to ten shares, and on the third day or thereafter might subscribe for as many shares as remained unsold. The commissioners

appointed to receive subscriptions, certified that 123 persons had subscribed for a total of 483½ shares. What appears in this day to be a peculiar provision was that no shareholder should be entitled to cast more than ten votes, irrespective of the number of shares he might hold in excess of that number. The largest number of shares subscribed by one person was 40. Joseph Howell and Samuel Jones each held that number. Stephen Girard was one of the original shareholders and held four shares. John Ruckman subscribed for four shares and in April, 1815, he was elected one of the managers. At the time of the destruction of the bridge in 1923, one of his descendants, John Ruckman, was treasurer of the company.

Dollar a Day for Labor.

It is known that all classes of labor employed in erecting and repairing the bridge received very small pay, and material was also very low in price. A resolution of the officers entered upon the minutes of the company, fixed the pay of masons and their helpers at not more than \$1.00 per day. As late as 1843, Major Kelley agreed to procure and lay good sound hemlock planks on the bridge for \$8.00 per thousand feet.

A maximum rate of tolls allowed to be collected by the company was fixed by the Legislature of New Jersey, to wit: For every coach, landau, chariot, phaeton or other pleasurable carriage, with four wheels, drawn by four horses, the sum of 75 cents; and for every wagon with four horses, the sum of 63 cents; and for every carriage of the same description, drawn by two horses, the sum of 50 cents; for every chaise, riding chair, sulkey, cart, or other two wheel carriage, or a sleigh or sled with two horses, the sum of 38 cents; and for the same with one horse, the sum of 25 cents; for a single horse and rider, the sum of 12½ cents; for every foot passenger, the sum of three cents; for every head of horned cattle, the sum of three cents; for every sheep and swine, the sum of one cent."

Special Rate for Fishermen.

The maximum rates of toll allowed under the act of incorporation were not always adhered to. The shad fishermen employed at Green Brier fishery, on the Pennsylvania side, were granted special low rates for the fishing season. Persons hauling lime, from the quarries at Solebury, were granted a low rate of toll based upon the number of bushels hauled on each trip. Special low rates were granted families on their way to attend religious services, but in later years they, as well as funeral processions and military bodies were allowed to pass free. In 1817, by resolution of the managers, persons hauling lime, stone and timber for the Baptist meeting house to be erected in Amwell, near the Centre Bridge, were exempted from toll. This was for the original Sandy Ridge Baptist church which was completed and dedicated in 1818. Delaware Township had not yet been cut off from Amwell.

Scrip in Place of Money.

In 1842, to facilitate the making of change, the bridge company issued scrip of the denomination of 5, 10, 15 and 20 cents. A complete set of this scrip is in possession of the Hunterdon County Historical Society. All the denominations are well preserved and are beautiful specimens of printers' art of the last century.

Old Centre Bridge for many years was an important crossing place for Hunterdon County farmers, many of whom made frequent trips to Philadelphia to market their produce. The Bush and Willow Grove taverns were popular stopping places. In Philadelphia there were a number of taverns that catered to farmer's custom. The farmers, after spending the night in one of these taverns, would drive their teams to a curb market set aside for the purpose, and dispose of their wares. The surplus grain raised on Hunterdon County farms was generally carted to New Brunswick. After the feeder of the Delaware and Raritan canal was opened for navigation a grain store was built in Stockton adjoining the feeder and almost

opposite the bridge entrance. Grain was bought from the farmers on both sides of the river and shipped on the canal. Later the building was used for storing wagon wheel felloes that were manufactured in the saw mill.

Old Time Lime Frolics.

At the time of the building of the bridge, lime was in general use for fertilizer. The lime quarries and kilns at Limeport, just below Centre Bridge, were very active and continued so for many years. The bridge company granted low rates of toll for teams hauling lime, and Hunterdon County farmers would organize lime frolics and assist each other in hauling lime to their farms.

Up to about 1880, many flocks of sheep were kept on the farms of Hunterdon County, and in the seventies the writer saw droves of several hundred cross the old bridge from Pennsylvania into New Jersey. These droves would be slowly driven along the highways, stopping for overnight pasturage at convenient places, and sales would be made to farmers.

Early in the history of the bridge, the officers were interested in having convenient roads opened in New Jersey, leading to the bridge. In one instance a committee reported that they had procured a public road to be opened from Flemington to Two Bridges, and at another time that they had been instrumental in having a road laid out, and procured an order for its opening from Flemington to Somerville. In more recent years they were interested in having a street opened in Stockton, leading from Ferry Street to Prallsville. Cyrus Risler was a member of the bridge committee, and took such an active part in the matter that the street was named in his honor.

In 1850, the bridge company purchased a canal basin and lot, near the Pennsylvania end of the bridge, from the estate of Nicholas Wanamaker. This was evidently to be used, to aid patrons of the bridge in making shipments by boat on the Pennsylvania canal, but it does not appear from the records that it was ever used to

any great extent, and in 1866 it was sold to Albert Livezey and is now a part of the Thomas Connor property.

The Plymouth Railroad.

In 1836, the Plymouth Railroad Company was incorporated in Pennsylvania for the purpose of connecting the lime quarries in Solebury with the canal feeder on the New Jersey side of the river, but it was not until 1843 that the bridge company granted permission to lay tracks across the bridge. The project was not carried out and remained dormant until 1853, when the bridge company procured an act of the Legislature of Pennsylvania renewing the charter of the railroad company. At this time it was intended to connect this railroad with the Belvidere and Delaware Railroad, which had recently been extended north of Lambertville. However, the Plymouth Railroad was never built.

The approach to the bridge, on the New Jersey side of the river (Bridge Street, Stockton), originally purchased from Joseph Howell, was in 1850 deeded to Bartles and Van Sickle, with the understanding that Bartles and Van Sickle were to deed a like quantity of land to the bridge company, the purpose of the transfer being to make the approach less oblique. Since Bartles and Van Sickle owned the land on both sides, this transfer of equal units was evidently made by deed from the Centre Bridge Company to Bartles and Van Sickle, covering the original approach, and a subsequent deed from Bartles and Van Sickle to the Centre Bridge Company, covering equal measurements, but swinging the center line westward at the northerly end so that, if projected, it would strike the center of the hotel hall door. We are not told how great this westward swing was, but from calculations based on original and present bearings, it must have been fully thirty feet. This simple device was no doubt adopted to avoid the work of surveying two triangles, one on the easterly side to be conveyed to Bartles and Van Sickle, and one on the westerly side to be conveyed to the Centre Bridge Company. Bartles and Van Sickle were making considerable im-

provements in Stockton at that time. One of these improvements was the building that is now known as the Mason store property, on the corner of Main and Bridge Streets.

Street Owned by Company.

Later several property owners on the westerly side of this approach were found to have encroached upon the land of the bridge company, some with fences and some with buildings. In 1871, under pressure of the bridge officials, they signed an agreement to remove their encroachments, but they were never required to do so, and it is supposed that the agreement was for the purpose of more clearly establishing the title of the land to the bridge company. This street remained the property of the company for many years. As late as 1877 they paid Peter Best for filling the street with material from his quarry. It is generally understood that later, before the Boro of Stockton was formed, it was accepted by Delaware Township as a public road, but there does not appear to be any record of the transfer.

A Steamer on the Delaware.

Before the extension of the Belvidere Railroad above Lambertville, a steamboat made several trips between Lambertville and Easton. An old newspaper clipping, in the possession of Alfred L. Gimson of Lambertville, describes this steamer as being a sidewheel boat, 110 feet long and having two smokestacks. This boat was built in Maine by Young and Company and arrived at Trenton in May, but it was not until November that there was sufficient water in the river to enable the steamer to make the trip thru Scudder's and Well's Falls. Great difficulty was encountered in passing thru Well's Falls, but the passage was finally accomplished with the assistance of men with setting poles and others on the shore pulling on a rope. This boat was named the "Major Barnet" and was licensed to carry fifty passengers. Except to say that it was in the 40's, no date is given in the account. The extension of the railroad above Lambertville put the steamboat out of business and it

was afterward taken to Florida.

In 1860, the **Kitattiny Improvement Company**, of Easton, Pa., had a steamboat built by Thomas Bishop, who operated a boat yard along the Lehigh at that place. The intention of the company was to operate the boat between Easton and Port Jervis. On March 6th, 1860, this boat, named the "Alfred Thomas," attempted her maiden trip and while passing thru the rapids at Getter's Island, below Belvidere, the boiler exploded killing thirteen passengers and injuring a number of the others. (Easton Free Press).

Old Centre Bridge had its place in literature and art. Leona Dalrymple, author of "Diane of the Green Van," a \$10,000 prize novel that met with

a large sale, describes it as the crossing place of the green van, on its journey thru the Delaware Valley. During the progress of the fire that destroyed the old structure, Edward W. Redfield, a famous artist, made sketches and from them a painting that attracted wide attention and favorable comment of art critics. On the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware, for several miles both above and below the site of the bridge, are located many homes of famous artists, who find inspiration for their work in the beautiful scenery of the Delaware Valley, and the picturesque old structure appears in a number of their paintings.

